

## Participatory Video as a Tool of Indigenous Resistance, Reimagining and Decolonization in Distrito Urracá, Panama

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"Historically, our indigenous population suffered in the epoch of colonial conquistadors, suffered in a war with firearms. Nowadays, we're seeing that the war that is maintained against the indigenous population, against the original population, is a psychological war."

- Mauricio Machado, Ngäbé resident of Distrito Urracá, Panama

"Narratives...are always immersed in history and never innocent. Whether we can unmake [hegemonic discourses of] development and perhaps even bid farewell to the Third World will equally depend on the social invention of new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing."

- Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*

"Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly reinvesting in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; ceremonial and spiritual pursuits; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions. All of these require us—as individuals and collectives—to diagnose, interrogate and eviscerate the insidious nature of conquest, empire, and imperial thought in every aspect of our lives. It requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context within which they were originally generated."

- Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*

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In late 2006, while working on a documentary video in Honduras' Siria Valley about the effects of Goldcorp's controversial open-pit San Martín gold and silver mine, which had been in operation for over five years by that point, I received word of the impending forced eviction of five Mayan Q'eqchi' communities from their ancestral territories in the El Estor region of eastern Guatemala. The evictions were to be carried out by the Guatemalan national police and military forces at the behest of Canadian mining company Skype Resources, which, through its Guatemalan

subsidiary, Compañía Guatemalteca de Níquel (CGN), claimed ownership over the territory—although the legitimacy of that claim has been contested.<sup>1</sup>

I travelled to the region in early January 2007 to be present with my video camera to document what would transpire over the two days of evictions on January 8 and 9. They were administered by the local public prosecutor, Rafael Andrade Escobar, and the hundreds of national police and military forces that had marshalled in the region to enforce them. What transpired was far from peaceful. In at least one of the five communities, Barrio La Pista, people's homes were demolished with chainsaws. In another, Barrio La Revolución, they were burned to the ground while the men, women and children who had resided there looked on helplessly. Feelings of anger, anguish and despair were palpable as people witnessed their homes and communities being destroyed. In yet another eviction a week later in one of the more remote of the five communities—Lote Ocho (Lot 8), eleven local women report having been gang raped by police and mining company security officers who had arrived to carry out the evictions. These women are currently suing the mining company in a Canadian court.<sup>2</sup>

On January 10, 2007, the day following the first set of evictions that month, Skye Resources published a press release claiming that the "squatters who had been illegally occupying" company land had been removed, and that the evictions had been carried out in a peaceful manner. It thanked the Guatemalan National Police Force for the professional manner in which it had conducted itself, expressed regret that, "previous attempts at settlement of this issue through dialog were unsuccessful," and affirmed the company's commitment "to continue our discussions on matters of concern with the local communities." It pledged to work with the affected communities, "to continue...to build a solid partnership between CGN and its neighbors."<sup>3</sup> Recently acquired documents attained through the foregoing lawsuit, however, reveal this to be untrue: the mining company's strategy had never been to engage in dialogue to resolve disputes with the local communities that were claiming the territory as their own, but rather to create the appearance of dialogue as a public relations exercise, while in reality working to thwart the local population's claims to their territory and expel them from the concession.<sup>4</sup>

At first glance, the company's press release appeared to be a fairly boilerplate corporate communiqué, with the whole issue seeming to be something that would likely fly far below the public radar. I decided to post a 10-minute video of the evictions on YouTube to reveal what actually transpired and contest the mining company's distorted and inaccurate version of events.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a treatment of the history of mining companies' presence in the region since their inception in the 1950s, see Schnoor, S. (2013). "Land Claims and the Erasure of History – Forced Evictions near El Estor." In *Governmentality And The New Spirit Of Exploitation: The Politics Of Legitimacy And Resistance To Canadian Mining In Guatemala And Honduras* (Doctoral dissertation, Communication & Culture, York/Ryerson Universities, Toronto, Canada). p.186-215. Retrieved from: <http://digital.library.ryerson.ca/islandora/object/RULA:2696>

<sup>2</sup> For details of the case – Margarita Caal Caal v. HudBay Minerals Inc., see <http://www.chocversushudbay.com>

<sup>3</sup> Skye Resources, "Land Occupations End At Fenix Project," 10 Jan 2007. The release stated: "'We are grateful to the Guatemalan Public Ministry and the National Police Force for the professional manner in which this unfortunate situation was resolved," said Ian Austin, Skye's President and CEO. "We also would like to thank the stakeholders on both sides of this dispute for maintaining a peaceful atmosphere during this action. We regret that our previous attempts at settlement of this issue through dialog were unsuccessful, but we also reaffirm our commitment to continue our discussions on matters of concern with the local communities in the El Estor region.'"

<sup>4</sup> See Russell, G. (2018, July 19). "Hudbay Minerals corporate documents reveal extensive knowledge about and enabling of repression and corruption in Guatemala." Available at: <https://canada-haiti.ca/content/hudbay-minerals-corporate-documents-reveal-extensive-knowledge-about-and-enabling>

<sup>5</sup> The original posting is online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q20YxkM-CGI>. A slightly updated version of the original video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JgwtLuISE1Y>.

Online video sharing was a relatively new phenomenon at the time. It was impossible to predict the effects of posting the video, but sharing a brief vignette of the events as they actually took place, in a manner that could be distributed as widely as possible, seemed urgent. I had decided to frame the video around the voice of a local Mayan Q'eqchi' woman, Concepción Kim Tiul, who passionately and eloquently railed against the injustice of the evictions while watching her home being destroyed in the community of Barrio La Unión. Those few minutes of video seemed to capture and convey the experience of being unjustly evicted better than thousands of words might have been able to. As the video circulated throughout the region and beyond, it became increasingly difficult for the mining company to maintain its narrative of peaceful relocation of Indigenous "invaders." My hope was that at the very least, giving such a platform to the voices of those being evicted may help to put the situation on the map for those who would encounter it, and hopefully some would be moved to take action in a capacity that might help to remedy the injustice of the situation. This, in turn, could serve as a reminder to the mining company, and to other companies facing similar situations, that in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, violent evictions of Indigenous populations and other forms of mistreatment of marginalized communities, cannot be guaranteed to evade the attention and scrutiny of the public at large. The safe cover for the public relations spin of corporate press releases—in this case, largely afforded by the difficulty in bearing witness to events as they transpire in distant and remote places—is no longer as safe as it once had been.

Posting the video had an unexpected outcome. Shortly after it began circulating online, Canada's ambassador to Guatemala at the time, Kenneth Cook, discredited it, advising people that it had been fabricated—that it was a work of propaganda, not to be believed. He claimed that Concepción Kim Tiul—the Mayan Q'eqchi' woman at the centre of the video, whose eloquent protest while watching her home being destroyed decries the injustice of the evictions—was actually an actress whom I had paid to "perform" in this manner. He also claimed that photographs that I include in the video—some depicting heavily armed soldiers running through the woods, with others showing families in despair as they watch their homes being burned to the ground—were not taken at the evictions as claimed in the video, but were actually old photographs from the Guatemalan internal conflict (which had ended in 1996), and that he had seen at least one of them many times over the ensuing years.<sup>6</sup> These claims were patently, unequivocally false, and not only served to discredit the legitimate voices of the Mayan Q'eqchi' people depicted in the video and their long-standing land-claims, development and human rights concerns, but also cast me as a manipulative propagandist—which is a dangerous reputation to have in Guatemala, where people perceived to be opposing large-scale mining projects are not infrequently subject to intimidation, threats, assault, and even assassination. His comments served to deny the ugly reality on the ground, implying that the depicted Indigenous peoples' voices of resistance and the images of the illegal evictions could not possibly be real. After my initial efforts at achieving redress failed, I sued the ambassador for defamation in an Ontario court—a case that was ultimately ruled in my favour at trial.<sup>7</sup> These unexpected turns of events aroused some interest in the situation and led to

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<sup>6</sup> The photographs included in the video were indeed all taken at the January 2007 evictions in question, by photographer James Rodríguez. For some of his images from the evictions, including those included in the video, see: <https://mimundo.photoshelter.com/gallery/CGN-2007-El-Estor-Panzos-Evictions/G0000LiKCxsx9ujI/C0000XrSFYDdBQZw> and <https://mimundo.photoshelter.com/gallery/2007-01-Violent-Eviction-of-Barrio-Revolucion/G0000iL97M4hAgC0/C0000hXUK396w3Qw>

<sup>7</sup> The initial efforts included reaching out to the ambassador himself, requesting an apology, a retraction of the comments, and an explanation; contacting Peter MacKay, then minister of Foreign Affairs, seeking an explanation for the ambassador's conduct, and an inquiry into the matter to investigate the broader implications of the ambassador's actions, which I had argued appeared to be symptomatic of Canadian government policy that privileges Canadian extractive industries operating abroad over the human rights

some media attention that helped to raise awareness about both the evictions and the larger issues in question, such as the poor conduct of Canadian mining companies operating abroad and how the Canadian state supports and facilitates their activities—even at the expense of the affected communities.<sup>8</sup>

While needless to say, not all publicly-circulated videos elicit such an unusual response, the experience revealed to me an intrinsic power of the medium in general: it felt safe to presume that the ambassador felt impelled to respond to the video in the manner in which he did, because something visceral in Concepción Kim Tiul's denouncing of the evictions, and the photographs of local residents watching their homes being burned to the ground, proved to be a sufficient threat—perhaps to the mining company's operations, or perhaps to the reputations of Canadian mining companies in the region more broadly—to warrant such egregious and "reckless" conduct on his behalf.<sup>9</sup> It also left me with a renewed appreciation of the importance of video as a tool of cultural and territorial defence, and in particular, as a tool that can be wielded by Indigenous communities that are increasingly confronting threats to their lands, lives and livelihoods. Bearing witness to these threats, incursions and violations of rights, and circulating these images as widely as possible, seems like an increasingly necessary component of today's struggles for land and the defense of rights. Approaching these technologies as critical tools of communication in the aid of such struggles, I began to work with Indigenous communities throughout Latin America, providing video-making equipment and leading workshops with community members on how to use it. The work is grounded in the conviction that video technology allows local communities to not only bear witness to events as they unfold over the course of their particular struggles with state and private sector forces, but the very process of participatory video-making itself is also a means by which communities can collectively work through, articulate and defend their visions for alternative life projects to the dominant model of industrial extraction and dispossession that they are increasingly confronting—through projects that are often advanced under the blanket term, "development."

## Distrito Urracá

This chapter will focus upon work that I have been doing since 2015 with Ngäbé and Buglé communities in Panama, just north of Santa Fé National Park in the state of Veraguas, and what I have learned from the people with whom I have had the privilege to work. The local inhabitants refer to their region as Distrito Urracá, named after the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century Ngäbé warrior who fought against the invasion of his territory by Spanish conquistadors. Over the ensuing five centuries

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and development needs of local communities; and filing an Access to Information Request with the embassy in Guatemala City and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa for any information that may shed light upon the situation. When all of these initiatives failed to bear fruit, only a legal avenue appeared to remain as a viable means of seeking accountability. The lawsuit itself would have been impossible were it not for the tireless, pro-bono commitment of the lawyers who took on my case, Murray Klippenstein and Cory Wanless, from Klippensteins Barristers & Solicitors in Toronto.

<sup>8</sup> Some of those media stories include: *As It Happens*, CBC Radio, March 15 & 19, 2017, and June 18, 2010; *The Current*, CBC Radio, May 10, 2012. All four CBC Radio segments available at: <https://goo.gl/PzvknX>. *On the Map with Avi Lewis*, CBC Television, June 19, 2007; "Searching for gold at the end of the Guatemalan rainbow." *W5*, CTV, April 17, 2010 - <https://www.ctvnews.ca/w5-searching-for-gold-at-the-end-of-the-guatemalan-rainbow-1.502718>; "Cook feels the heat." *New Internationalist*, Sept. 1, 2010 - <https://newint.org/columns/currents/2010/09/01/cook-canadian-ambassador-guatemala>; Denise Balkissoon, "Former Canadian ambassador guilty of slander." *Toronto Star*, June 17, 2010 - [https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/06/17/former\\_canadian\\_ambassador\\_guilty\\_of\\_slander.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/06/17/former_canadian_ambassador_guilty_of_slander.html)

<sup>9</sup> "Reckless" is one term used by Ontario Superior Court Justice Pamela Thomson to describe the ambassador's behavior, as read in her verdict in the case, delivered June 16, 2010.



subsequent to Columbus' arrival to their region in 1501, the local Ngäbé and Buglé population has managed to ward off continual waves of what many in the region refer to as neo-conquistadores in various forms, whom locals assert have continued to come to their region in an effort to plunder their land, natural wealth and resources. That successful resistance appears as though it may be coming to an end today, or at the very least, is experiencing a profound challenge that leaves many in the area gearing up for a new kind of fight.

Distrito Urracá hugs the Atlantic coast of the country, with approximately 40 km of coastline on the Caribbean Sea between the Calovébora River to the west and the Belén River to the east, with territory stretching inland towards and including the Santa Fé National Park. While a precise population is difficult to determine, it is likely inhabited by between 10,000-20,000 people,<sup>10</sup> most of whom are Indigenous Ngäbé and Buglé, and live throughout the region in approximately thirty remote, rural hamlets. With virtually no roads in the region, the villages are connected by foot paths and waterways: six rivers, which run into the sea, bisect the territory, with the coastline operating like the region's highway to access the various rivers. Given the high cost of transportation by boat, however, most of the region's inhabitants travel the region by foot, with multi-day treks between communities being the norm, not the exception. Home to a wide variety of bird, insect and plant species, the natural beauty and biodiversity of the region is stunning to behold. The region is also home to large deposits of copper and other metals. Its natural beauty, mineral deposits, some fast-flowing rivers, and the fact that it has thus far been relatively untouched by extractive or other industrial projects, has made it a target for a variety of forces that now serve to threaten the Ngäbé's and Buglé's territory and ways of life.

These threats are made all the more real by the local Ngäbé and Buglé population's vulnerability: while Panama does have a system of comarcas—areas of Indigenous territorial autonomy in which the local Indigenous population has some control over what form of development may be permissible within their territory, the district of Urracá is not a part of one. In the negotiations leading up to the establishment of the adjacent Comarca Ngäbé Buglé in 1997, this region had been part of discussion for inclusion. It was excluded at the last minute, however, depriving it of the key form of territorial defense offered to those residing within it. The national government of Panama does not recognize the Ngäbé and Buglé inhabitants of Distrito Urracá as having legitimate ancestral claims to this territory—despite the fact that this is belied by history which demonstrates that the present residents' ancestors indeed inhabited this territory going back centuries, if not millennia. Official government narratives, like those found in some mainstream media outlets in Panama, can often cast the local population as immigrants from elsewhere, or even as invaders who threaten the ecological integrity of the land.

While the Panamanian government has shown little interest in recognizing the presence and legitimate territorial claims of the local Ngäbé and Buglé populations, it has shown a keen willingness, indeed enthusiasm, to pursue the "development" of the territory for foreign investment. The government has been investing millions of dollars in large infrastructure projects that will open the territory to outside investment. A key part of this involves the construction of a new 30 km highway that runs through the region, connecting the Pan-American Highway with the Caribbean coast at the town of Calovébora, at the mouth of the Calovébora River. The highway

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<sup>10</sup> Official government censuses are conducted every 10 years. The last census, in 2010, counted 7,000 people in the area. Locals complained, however, that census takers neglected to travel to some of the more difficult-to-reach communities. Bilbao cites the current population at 20,000. See Bilbao, G. (2017). "Atlantic Conquest." December. Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. Available at: <https://pulitzercenter.shorthand.com/atlanticconquest>

project is referred to, without irony, as *La Conquista del Atlántico*, or the Conquest of the Atlantic (see figure 1).



Figure 1 – Roadside sign. Near El Guabál, Veraguas.

Construction of the new road began in 2014, and is slated for completion in 2019. While the region currently lacks electricity, a new power transmission cable slated to run through the territory along the Atlantic coast, referred to as *Línea Cuatro*, or Line Four, is designed to export abroad the surplus electricity that the country generates, and is projected to double the capacity of electricity exported to Central America. It is also intended to access markets in neighbouring Colombia. Like the new highway, the power line will also greatly open up the possibility of installing large-scale industrial projects, such as open-pit metal mines, in the region. The local Ngäbé and Buglé population has filed a complaint with the office of the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman of the International Finance Corporation, which is financing the \$500 million construction cost of the power line.<sup>11</sup> The complaint asserts that the local Indigenous population had not been previously consulted about the construction of the project on their territory. While there are presently no active mines within their region (although one of the world's largest copper mines—First Quantum Minerals' Cobre Panama—sits just to the east), much of the region has already been concessioned for resource extraction (see figure 2).

<sup>11</sup> See Arcia, J. (2018, August 4). "Etesa avanza hacia su cuarta línea en medio de quejas." *La Estrella de Panamá*. Available at: <http://laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/etesa-avanza-hacia-cuarta-linea-medio-quejas/24076328>

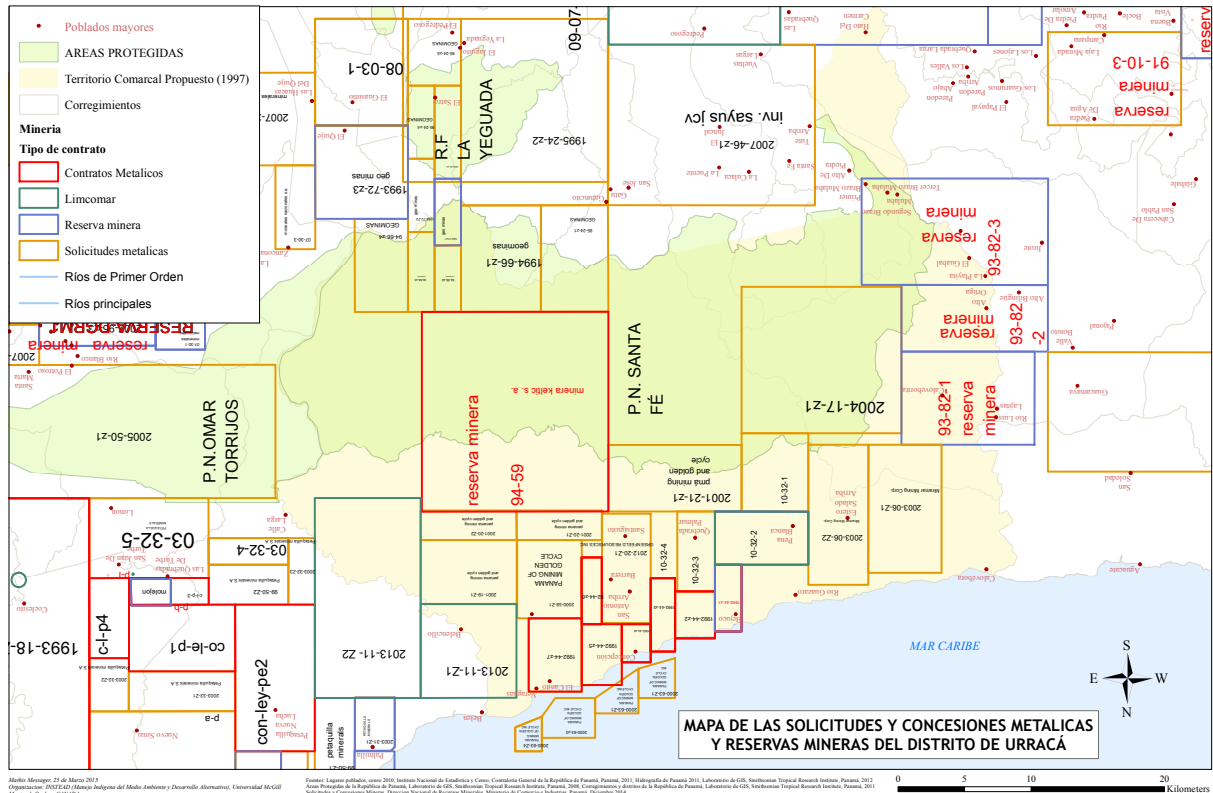


Figure 2 – Map of mining concessions in Distrito Urracá.

To many locals, the new highway and electricity line not only threaten to bring unwanted industrial projects such as large-scale metal mines, but have opened up the region to fraudulent titling and other forms of speculators and land grabbers. One such individual is Dutch real estate developer Max Van Rijswijk, who has presented himself to locals who reside upon beachfront parcels of land along the Caribbean coast, as the head of environmental conservation NGOs, wishing to buy their land to construct ecological protected areas for conservation purposes. Locals have attested that he urgently whisks them off by helicopter to his lawyers’ office in Panama City, to sign the documents transferring their land to him.<sup>12</sup> They report to having received a fraction of the sum that he had promised in the agreement. Once titled in his name, his ruse becomes clear as

<sup>12</sup> Most residents of the region lack formal legal title to their land in the form of a deed, but some have availed themselves of a unique system of possession rights in Panama, referred to as *Derechos de Posesión*, or Rights of Possession (ROP). Residents who have resided upon a parcel of land for a minimum of five years are eligible to apply for ROP. Unlike formal land deeds, however, ROP are not registered with Panama’s Public Registry. They can be transferred to third parties—including foreigners—who, once holding the ROP in their name to a particular plot of land, can then legally change the ROP to a formal land deed. Land speculators have taken advantage of this system, or as Bilbao (2017) notes, “[possession rights] are informal titles that in theory grants the right to register the land to those who work it and have lived on it for at least five years. But many people do not understand how to do out the paper work required to register their land. This system has helped hundreds of humble subsistence farmers, but has also allowed lawyers of politically connected real estate developers to title tens of thousands of acres of lands at bargain prices. By permitting the commercialization of possession rights, entrepreneurs from the city come to the communities with their lawyers and institutional contacts, acquire the land rights at ridiculously low prices and re-title them in their name. Legally titled, the price of the land triples automatically. And so begins the feast of land speculation.” See Bilbao, G. (2017), *supra* note 10. For requirements of applying for ROP, see, ANATI (Autoridad Nacional de Administración de Tierras -National Authority of Land Administration), “Requisitos para el reconocimiento de Derechos Posesorios y Adjudicación a Título Gratuito u Oneroso en zonas costeras e insulares, en aplicación de la Ley 80 de 31 de diciembre de 2009,” available at <http://www.anati.gob.pa/index.php/noticias/73-requisitos-para-el-reconocimiento-de-derechos-posesorios-y-adjudicacion-a-titulo-gratuito-u-oneroso-en-zonas-costeras-e-insulares-en-aplicacion-de-la-ley-80-de-31-de-diciembre-de-2009>

Van Rijswijk then posts these properties for sale as luxury, paradise beachfront real estate plots, listing them for sale for millions or tens of millions of dollars each.<sup>13</sup> It is reported that he has thus far managed to accumulate over 2,500 hectares, covering 12 km of coastline.<sup>14</sup> His promotional videos selling his beachfront real estate acquisitions laud the construction of the new road as a key selling factor for would-be buyers.<sup>15</sup>

There is much anger, frustration and despair felt amongst many local residents over the threats to their territory that they are presently confronting. At an August 2018 regional gathering, in which hundreds of people from throughout the region gathered for the annual three-day assembly to discuss the issues facing them, there appeared to be unanimous opposition to the new highway and power transmission line. Both were seen as new incarnations of the same old plan that they have encountered for centuries: people argue that these projects emerge from and promise to reproduce massive inequality. While built on the pretext of helping to "develop" the local population, these forms of incoming "development" projects are seen by many locals as opportunities for development only for wealthy investors, with dispossession, illness, environmental contamination and loss of culture and identity being the only consequences that they foresee in store for them.

While the Ngäbé and Buglé inhabitants of the region may lack either individual land title or collective legal title and territorial protection in the form of a comarca, what they certainly do not lack is political organization. Many evince a selfless and tireless commitment to work in service of the community, and the same spirit that their ancestors bore to fight and defend their territories from what they refer to as today's new wave of colonial invaders. Politically, they organize themselves under the governing structure of a *Congreso*, which is headed by an elected leadership board comprised of a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and various other posts. There is also a regional cacique, or chief, who is chosen by the people to, amongst other tasks, mediate local disputes and represent the communities' interests when dealing with people from outside of the region. The cacique also holds final executive authority over matters discussed by the *Congreso*. Each community has its own spokesperson, or *vocero*, whose job resembles that of secretary and community representative: the *vocero* organizes local meetings and is the relay of information between the communities and the regional *Congreso*. Political gatherings, such as the annual three-day *Congreso* held each year in mid-August, are open to all residents of the territory and practice direct democracy, as reflected in the consensus-based decision-making that guides the activities of the leadership and committees that are struck to tackle the key issues facing them today.<sup>16</sup>

Their overarching aspiration is to achieve their own comarca—that is, their own legal recognition by the state that they are the legitimate "owners" of the territory (although most would balk at the term ownership, maintaining that one cannot "own" the land), in order to have full control over who may enter and what they may do upon the territory. Many view this struggle as one of life and death for their communities: victory means the continued viable existence of Ngäbé and Buglé communities living in their chosen ways upon their territory; failure to achieve this status presents to many the nearly certain ominous outcome of loss of land and livelihood.

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<sup>13</sup> See Bilbao, G. (2017), *supra* note 10.

<sup>14</sup> See Bilbao, G. (2017, December 13). "La Conquista Del Atlántico: El hombre fuerte del Caribe." *La Prensa*. Available at: [https://imprensa.prensa.com/panorama/patron-Caribe\\_0\\_4915758540.html](https://imprensa.prensa.com/panorama/patron-Caribe_0_4915758540.html)

<sup>15</sup> See <https://web.archive.org/web/20190301202435/http://playassantafe.com/>

<sup>16</sup> The term *Congreso* is used interchangeably to refer to both the elected governing body of the region and the three-day regional meeting held annually in mid-August.



Protecting their territory from unwanted mines, hydroelectric dams, land speculators, fraudulent titling and tourism projects is seen as a long, complex and multi-faceted struggle—indeed numerous people in the region have referred to it as an endless struggle, and one invariably involving many steps along the way.

### **Participatory Video Workshops in Distrito Urracá**

I have been working in the region since the spring of 2015, offering participatory video-making workshops as a means of supporting the struggles that the local Ngäbé and Buglé people face for territorial and cultural defense—struggles that, as noted, are ultimately focused upon attaining legal recognition in the form of a comarca. I have travelled to the region annually, providing video-making equipment, leading workshops on how to use it, and discussing with workshop participants and other residents how they feel video may be useful in the service of their campaigns of defending their rights and territory.<sup>17</sup> Equipment provided over the years has included video cameras and accessories; lavalier and shotgun microphones, with windscreens and a telescoping boom pole; tripods and monopods; a portable video light for night-time or interior shooting; a laptop for editing and presenting works; a portable projector, speaker and large portable screen for presenting videos and other materials within the communities; waterproof dry-bags and hard-shell cases to protect the equipment from the near-constant rain; and portable solar panels and batteries to charge all of the equipment, given the lack of electricity in the area. The workshops have offered training on everything from technical elements, such as camera operation, sound recording, editing and online video sharing, to less technical matters, such as how to plan and organize a project, write a storyboard, and conduct an effective interview. I have travelled throughout the region over the years with the workshop participants, helping them to create and realize the video projects that are collaboratively formulated.

Key questions that I have sought to address in the work include, how can video be used as a tool to assist in communities' struggles for the defense of territory, livelihoods, culture, heritage, language, life plans and food sovereignty—that is to say, in ongoing struggles related to the recognition of rights, self-determination, self-governance and land tenure? I put these questions to the participants of my participatory video workshops, for us to explore and discuss the ways in which video may be most useful for them. Amongst the key functions that have emerged in discussion, video is seen as useful for bearing witness to significant events; for documenting and revealing on a global stage the practices of police and private security forces at protests or other engagements with community members, such as noted at the outset of this chapter, in regards to the 2007 evictions near El Estor, Guatemala; it can also expose the effects of destructive forces and practices that a community may be confronting, such as environmental contamination caused by a mine or other large-scale industrial project; it can be used as an educational tool within and across communities to share important information about issues of immediate concern; and as an archive of a community's history, it can serve to document and share important moments, such as the proceedings of *Congresos*, as well as elders' accounts of traditional practices, community history, life projects, stories of past struggles for territorial integrity, acts and movements of resistance against harmful and destructive forces and practices, and so forth. The community

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<sup>17</sup> Funding for the equipment and travel expenses has been provided by the Centre for Indigenous Conservation and Development Alternatives (CICADA), housed at the Department of Anthropology at McGill University in Montreal, where I have been working as a postdoctoral fellow. See <http://cicada.world>

members with whom I've been working in Distrito Urracá have outlined ways in which all of these levels of usefulness are applicable to their current situation. As one resident told me in 2015, video will help with preparing for the battles to come in resisting neo-colonial intrusions, or as she stated, "you don't just get into a fight. You assess your situation first, or you will get knocked out. You must plan, you must prepare, you must educate." She envisioned the community video equipment as being critical for this form of preparation and education.

Another important dimension has materialized in discussions about the usefulness of community-based participatory video: using it as a tool of decolonization and reimagining. Mauricio Machado, former secretary of the *Congreso*, has expressed this most pointedly. He maintains that his people are experiencing the onslaught of a form of psychological warfare that is currently being waged upon his people from all sides, in the form of the discursive construction of notions of wealth and poverty, developed and underdeveloped, and what it means to be Indigenous. He laments that many of his people have come to internalize dominant discourses of wealth/poverty and success/failure, believing themselves to be deficient subjects who must forever strive to attain the "successful" lifestyles found in "advanced" Western industrial societies, which embody the purportedly superior values of capitalism, individualism and endless material consumption. He maintains that for many people in his community, it can be a struggle to appreciate the immense wealth that they already enjoy with their present livelihoods, and he understands this form of symbolic violence as a core part of the state schooling system, and which ultimately seeks but one outcome: the communities' abandonment of their dream of territorial autonomy. He states:

The government, through the education system, tries to change the mentality of our Indigenous people, to believe that the economy, the accumulation of material wealth, is the means by which to get out of poverty. However, that has not been the case. All of the situations that we're seeing in our territories are the invasion of different programs so that the population doesn't continue with the dream and aspirations of having an autonomous territory (comarca), as we've been working for since a long time ago... [It's a] camouflage, a covering, a dress that the government is using to keep blindfolding our eyes, so that we don't continue with our aspirations. In this sense, I was speaking of a psychological war, because through education, when we enter school, the programs themselves, they tell us, when all the students leave school and finish their studies, they come out with a mentality of what the term of poverty means: to eliminate poverty, you have to accumulate wealth. So this term, in this sense, doesn't fit with our way of thinking. Because when they speak about poverty, they're speaking about the Indigenous people.<sup>18</sup>

He sought to dismantle these hegemonic discourses on "wealth" and "poverty" at an address delivered at the August 2018 regional *Congreso*, stating:

All governments plant in their campaigns and plans for the people, the notion of development for the poor. It's what we're facing now: through this type of project, the poor will emerge from poverty. But really, in different communities with highways, we see the reality. Calovébora was used to request this project. None of us were there. This always happens in societies—in ours and others. Who solicited the road? Two to three professionals, in the name of the humble people, who don't have the knowledge, justifying the road because there is a need and a benefit for the poor, claiming that through that, the

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<sup>18</sup> Personal interview. Santa Fé, Veraguas. 21 April 2016.

people here in North Santa Fé will get out of poverty. And many people applauded. But something new is happening in the territory: we are not in favour of a road through our territory. It will bring sickness to our people. It is a door for investors and parasites for our people. As we're humble and poor, we cannot understand the technical lingo that they use, but we realize that the road won't help us—it will hurt us. Important, rich people are applauding this highway project, because they know what window of opportunity, what impact is in store for them. It's not for us. They never tell us the truth. They always try to use propaganda to brainwash us. The road is for [the benefit of] foreigners. It means environmental contamination of the rivers and forests. Nobody mentions that. In this Congreso, we're realizing the reality of development brought by Atlantic Conquest: it's development for the large corporations, the wealthy minority, on the backs of the majority poor. They will never tell us the true impact of a project of this magnitude. They always try to find slogans in which we may fall. No project of this nature will benefit us if we're not prepared to receive it. And we have not requested it because we're not prepared to receive it. The hour has arrived to limit these projects. To sit face-to-face with them, and have them tell us these realities—not lie to us. We cannot continue to accept lies, without consultations. It is false that we are poor. *They* are poor because they must accumulate wealth infinitely, indefinitely—have mountains of money and are never satisfied. *That* is poverty.<sup>19</sup>

Mauricio sees community-led participatory video as a very useful tool to help reinvigorate and reinforce the dignity and self-respect of his people, and counteract the toxic inferiority complex that he argues can only lead to the gradual loss of a sense of Ngäbé or Buglé identity and pride in the vast and rich cultural heritage that such an identity entails. He understands participatory video as a useful part of the work of decolonization, which involves not only resisting and rejecting the colonial narratives that keep Indigenous populations experiencing themselves as defective or deficient subjects, but reimagining themselves, their communities and their connections with the world in ways that lead to proud commitments to their Indigenous identities and roots. As a graduate from the education program at local university, one of Mauricio's dreams is to create a curriculum to teach the Ngäbere and Buglere languages with video, which he feels would be an ideal medium, given that these are primarily oral, not written languages. He emphasizes the importance of language in connecting one to an indigenous cosmovision, stressing that language often becomes the lynchpin in anchoring one's sense of Indigenous pride and identity, and he laments that currently there exists no program in any school in the region in which these languages are taught. He understands language not as a mere conveyor or descriptor of reality, but as a system of thought that embodies whole systems of values and ways of seeing and being in the world; programs of language instruction thus become matters of critical importance to reconnect the younger generations with the cosmovisions of their ancestors. Lacking knowledge of the language is also seen as a disconnection from one's roots, and even identity; he explained that, for instance, while some community members have Buglé ancestry, due to their loss of the language, they are considered to be *campesinos*. He fears that with the gradual loss of language and the consequential erosion of a sense of Indigenous identity and pride, it will become easier for the destructive forces of land titling and resource extraction to displace and destroy the existing communities. Mauricio is thus driven as an educator by an urgency to resuscitate and rejuvenate the waning languages

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<sup>19</sup> Congreso de Distrito Urracá. Santiaguito. 13 August 2018.

spoken by the Ngäbé and Buglé, and he sees the video camera and projector as key tools in this project.

Beyond language instruction, and in a similar vein of decolonization, Mauricio and other community leaders, such as *Congreso* President Rogelio Urriola, see video as an important tool to aid in the collection and dissemination of their people's history. They feel that through the process of collecting and learning their history, project participants and those who may come to enjoy its eventual fruits may be galvanized within the community, and further connected to the places where they live. A collaborative history project is already underway in the region, in which certain members of the community travel to the different villages and record the stories of their elders. The video equipment is already planned to supplement this work, to create a video archive of these stories. This community-based collaborative history project is designed to counter and indeed replace the official history that members of the younger generation are still learning in school today. Both Mauricio and Rogelio balk at the egregious colonial history that is taught to students in the country—that Columbus' arrival in Panama was part of his "discovery" of America and that the coming of the early conquistadores helped to "unite" the European and Indigenous races. Rogelio, Mauricio and other members of the leadership in Urracá speak of creating a history curriculum for local students that not only teaches the ugly truth of the Spanish conquistadores' arrival—such as the rape, genocide and plunder that they brought to the region, but also includes their own remarkable history of resistance. In fact, the local inhabitants of Urracá boast a history that no other Indigenous community in the Americas can: that of Quibián, the Indigenous chief who led his people in expelling Columbus and his fleet from the region in April of 1502. This expulsion from the Ngäbé and Buglé territory on the Caribbean coast of Panama is the one and only recorded event in the history of Columbus' four voyages in which he had been successfully forcibly expelled by a local Indigenous population. The mouth of the river where the final battle took place—the Belén River—still to this day looks much the same as it would have looked over five centuries ago, when two of Columbus' four ships were burned down by the ancestors of the current inhabitants of the region, and the other two, with Columbus on board, managed to escape to Jamaica. The current leadership of Urracá dreams of creating a video that tells this story—in both documentary format and as a dramatic re-enactment—as a community-made curriculum tool that can be used to counteract the official narrative of this period that is taught in schools.

Many of these uses of video involve projects that are still on the horizon. A key reason that they have yet to materialize is that community members have simply been too busy using the technology in service of what they view as a more pressing and urgent project: declaring to the world that they exist, that the land that they reside upon is legitimately theirs, and that they intend to defend their lives and culture from the onslaught of invasive forces now facing them. Indeed, one factor that many in the region had seen as a key asset in staving off threats to their territory—their isolation and the difficulty in accessing the area—is now seen by some as a liability. A map of Indigenous territories in Panama included in a recent United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report on Indigenous development in the country shows Urracá as merely empty space.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the other Indigenous comarcas in the country, which are indeed clearly marked on the map, the empty space of Distrito Urracá falsely suggests that the area is devoid of inhabitants with ancestral territorial claims as legitimate as those found within neighbouring comarcas. Many in the area now feel that an urgent precursor to the establishment of their own comarca is to put themselves 'on the map'; this is not viewed as a strictly cartographic problem, but rather as a

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<sup>20</sup> UNDP. "Plan de Desarrollo Integral de Pueblos Indigenas de Panama."



dilemma of changing consciousness at large, to belie the myth that the region is uninhabited, or only inhabited by those who may lack legitimate ancestral claims to the land—recent immigrants or land invaders. Recent videos produced by members of the community—in which local residents express their desires and aspirations, their concerns, and their feelings about confronting the threats that they face—are intended to do just that.<sup>21</sup> These videos stoke and support the larger plans for video that participants of the workshops have, or as *Congreso* President and active videographer Rogelio Urriola states, “our dream in the future is to make a film about Quibián, Urracá, Congreso, us, whatever—but a big, professional documentary. That’s the aspiration. To announce that there is a people here, on a big, global stage.”<sup>22</sup>

As significant as such a documentary would undoubtedly be, the process of learning and making video can also be as important as the finished products. The process entails a three-tiered function for those participating in the workshops: at the most immediate level, there is the technical training with the equipment involved; beyond this, in travelling throughout their region and interviewing their elders and other residents of the communities, workshop participants are exposed to a broader education into both the present situation and the history of their people; at yet another level, there is hope that in so doing, participants will emerge with a stronger political orientation that animates them to dedicate themselves towards the struggles of advancing and defending their communities’ cultures, livelihoods and territories from impending threats. The skill-building of the first tier also functions beyond mere technical training; learning to operate the equipment can also help participants to enrich a sense of personal or collective capacity, in ways that learning any new skill often can. As Rosa Santander, Coordinator of the Women’s Congress and participant in a video-making workshop in 2015, stated in remarks intended to encourage people to get involved in the participatory video-making workshops: “it wasn’t hard for me to learn the technology; it was hard to get out of my head the idea that I couldn’t do it.”<sup>23</sup>

Gently encouraging would-be participants that they can indeed learn and adopt these tools to use them in the ways that they deem best, has been part of my job. Another aspect has been to be careful not to impose my sense of what they should do with the equipment. While imparting the requisite technical skills can often take the form of a one-way dissemination of knowledge, once these basic skills have been laid, I am careful not to inadvertently impose outside structures upon the workshop participants that may hinder more than help the process. Such potential hindrances include holding rigid ideas about how sounds and images should be presented, or how narratives should necessarily be put together. When it comes time to plan a video project, I offer assistance in organizing and developing the ideas that the participants collaboratively put forward; at this point in the process, however, I often do more listening than speaking, taking the role more of a facilitator, to help realize the projects that they have collectively expressed a wish to make—yet without disavowing my sense of what, from amongst their ideas, may work best. The work has presented the opportunity to consider and work on this critical balance.

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<sup>21</sup> See “Resistencia Indígena – Distrito Urracá, Norte de Santa Fé, Panamá” (2017), available at: <https://youtu.be/X5zX9-KZ-QU> and “Frente a la Conquista: Pueblos Originarios, Norte de Santa Fé” (2018), available at: <https://youtu.be/YVfUCqvGTjE>

<sup>22</sup> Congreso de Distrito Urracá. Santiaguito. 12 August 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

In approaching video technology as a tool of resistance, re-imagination and decolonization, it is useful to consider Escobar's work of deconstructing the dominant truth claims advanced by the Global North about the Global South—claims that masquerade as "neutral," "apolitical," "scientifically objective" assessments, by which the South is subjected to forces of domination and exploitation under a global system of grossly inequitable distributions of power, wealth and resources. In regards to discourses of "development" advanced by the Global North since the close of the Second World War, he argues that,

the most important exclusion, however, was and continues to be what development was supposed to be all about: people. Development was—and continues to be for the most part—a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treated people and cultures as abstract concepts, statistical figures to be moved up and down in the charts of 'progress.' Development was conceived not as a cultural process (culture was a residual variable, to disappear with the advance of modernization) but instead as a system of more or less universally applicable technical interventions intended to deliver some 'badly needed' goods to a 'target' population. It comes as no surprise that development became a force so destructive to Third World cultures, ironically in the name of people's interests.<sup>24</sup>

The leadership of Distrito Urracá has embraced participatory video-making workshops in their territory as one way of counteracting and speaking back to the dominant discourses on wealth and development that underpin and justify the threats that they currently face. Their hopes run deep over the potential impacts that video-making may have in their territory. Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar, writer and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson maintains that decolonization and Indigenous cultural resurgence involves challenging and deconstructing toxic legacies, as well as reconnecting with the forces that have animated and sustained Indigenous communities for millennia. She writes that:

Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly reinvesting in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal traditions; language learning; ceremonial and spiritual pursuits; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions. All of these require us—as individuals and collectives—to diagnose, interrogate and eviscerate the insidious nature of conquest, empire, and imperial thought in every aspect of our lives. It requires us to reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways in the dynamic, fluid, compassionate, respectful context within which they were originally generated.<sup>25</sup>

The emerging videographers of Distrito Urracá are indeed approaching video-making technology as tools that may help to, as Simpson offers, "interrogate and eviscerate the insidious nature of conquest, empire, and imperial thought," as well as help to "reclaim the very best practices of our traditional cultures, knowledge systems and lifeways." The video work in which they are currently involved entails creating new narratives by which they wish to present themselves on the world stage. As Escobar has argued, "narratives...are always immersed in history and never innocent.

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<sup>24</sup> Escobar, E. (2012). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p. 44.

<sup>25</sup> Simpson, L. (2011). *Dancing On Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence, and a New Emergence*. Winnipeg: ARP. 17-18.

Whether we can unmake [hegemonic discourses of] development and perhaps even bid farewell to the Third World will equally depend on the social invention of new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing."<sup>26</sup> The task at hand for many Indigenous communities today, of crafting, "new narratives, new ways of thinking and doing," must surely also encompass an ongoing process of looking back—of remembering, rehabilitating, fortifying and celebrating older ways of thinking and doing. To this end, participatory video making can be used as a tool of Indigenous resistance, reimagining and decolonization, to both challenge colonial legacies and strengthen and revitalize the cultural vision that may ensure the viability of healthy communities for generations to come.

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<sup>26</sup> Escobar (2012), *supra* note 24, p. 20.